



MELISSA PRITCHARD A SHORT STORY HEROINE

By Deborah Sussman Susser Photography by Brandon Sullivan

A slight woman with translucent skin and a nimbus of wavy, reddish hair, Melissa Pritchard is the walking embodiment of the earthy/cerebral mix that makes her writing so uniquely satisfying. She greets me at the door of her Tempe ranch house wearing jeans and a plain blue button-down shirt, and while I look at the bookshelf where she keeps her many publications (and a ceramic pot containing her father's ashes), she offers me coffee strong as rocket fuel.

Alan Cheuse, reviewing Pritchard's collection of linked short stories *Disappearing Ingenue* on NPR's *All Things Considered*, recently pronounced the book "dreamy and delightful," and it is. It also manages to be powerful, disturbing, and technically masterful, further testament to Pritchard's ability to hit readers in the heart, the gut, and the head all at once. "Fiction for me is about taking risks," Pritchard says emphatically. "I'm pushing it as hard as I can."

As Pritchard tells it, she played at being a writer in the '60s while she was getting a degree in comparative religions at University of California, Santa Barbara ("I smoked cigars and wore shirts with flowing sleeves," she recalls with a self-mocking half smile), but she didn't begin writing with purpose until she was almost 30 and a mother of two living in Evanston, Illinois. "It was a way to stay sane in the suburbs," she says.

Her first book, a collection of stories called *Spirit Seizures*, took her eight years.

She wrote in the toy-free zone under her dining-room table ("That one in there," she says, gesturing toward a perfectly nice, dark wood table that seems the unlikely co-star of any drama). For each story, she set herself a technical challenge, and she says she learned how to write as she went, retyping every draft of the manuscript from the very beginning on her electric typewriter. The collection won the Flannery O'Connor Award and the Carl Sandburg Literary Arts Award.

In the early '90s, after a stint running a children's theater program and teaching writing in Taos, New Mexico, Pritchard took a job at Arizona State University, where she is currently the director of the MFA program. "I first tripped across my love of teaching when I was getting divorced and had to make a living," she says. "And I thought, well, I don't want to be a waitress."

Since, as she modestly puts it, "I had an awareness that I had an ability," she decided to advertise herself on the Taos public radio station as a writing teacher. The response was so great she ended up having to offer two classes instead of one, at which point she went to the library to look for a book about how to teach writing. "I've always done everything backwards," she laughs.

Disappearing Ingenue (due out in paperback June 10) is Pritchard's fifth book. Its heroine, Eleanor Stoddard, reinvents herself every few years as, among other things, a budding Catholic saint, a freewheeling actress, and a romance writer with the *nom de plume* "Pearl Marvel," all of which is recounted in stories that are as related to—and different from—each other as siblings. It's a funny,

discomforting, and weirdly wise book, and it's turned the volume way up on Pritchard's buzz.

Pritchard's next book, scheduled for publication in the spring of 2004, grew out of her involvement with the Native-American community here—one of the aspects of life in Arizona to which she's most drawn. For the foreseeable future, she says, she'll stay in the Valley of the Sun, in the home she shares with her two grown daughters and artist Joseph Wolves Kill. "I really, finally have a home," she says, sounding a little surprised.

We stand in the front yard before I leave, discussing writing and children and aging well. "Voltaire," she offers, shielding her face from the sun with one hand, "said that one should live like a bourgeois and write like a revolutionary." And then she heads back across the neatly mowed lawn toward her house, where I imagine her, later that same day, hunting what she rightly calls fiction's "brutal, beautiful truth" under her dining-room table.

Metro Presents: Melissa Pritchard at Borders bookstores for a series of signings this summer. Pritchard will appear June 28 at the bookstore's Tempe location on Mill Avenue, July 12 at Biltmore Fashion Park, and July 26 in Mesa. Visit www.metromagaz.com for details.

**AN EXCERPT FROM
DISAPPEARING INGENUE**

"Copulation is the lyric of the mob."

—Baudelaire

"Happy gorillas are said to sing."

—Jeffrey Mason, *When Elephants Weep*

"Up and down the dull coastline of her desk, Eleanor Stoddard ticked her fingernails, Minnie Mouse airbrushed onto each bismuth-pink shield. She was back from Ladies where she'd flattened out Newsweek from its bug-swatter twist to read about the chief of the Cloud People, his vow to leap off a high cliff if a certain foreign petroleum company purchased his tribe's ancestral land from the Colombian government. Who would want that sort of thing on their conscience? There was a stamp-sized photograph of the chief, pudding faced, with black, beveled hair and the sexy, charismatic gaze of the not-quite-holy man. His story sat to the left of another article (both were recipe-card sized), about world forest fires and greenhouse temperatures, beside a pink graph nobody would leap off of anything for. Flags—not math—inspired sacrifice, thought Eleanor. With her Disney nails, she sliced out the Cloud Chief's small story, not wanting to lose his heroic possibilities. This was the second bit of news sparking the dry foolscap of her afternoon. The first was the gorilla, recently delivered to her garage by a young ecoterrorist, Moser, now airborne, leaving Phoenix for a week's walking tour through Cluj, a medieval city in Romania—at the sudden behest of his newest lover, an aspiring historian named Boris."



YOGA FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN'T BE BOTHERED TO DO IT GEOFF DYER

Imagine stepping into the mind of an intellectual friend who has been everywhere, read everything, and yet still likes to have a really good time. Well, maybe you don't have that friend, but Geoff Dyer makes an excellent substitute.

In his latest genre-defying book, Dyer recounts his heady global journeys, which meander over a lifetime's worth of travel to far-flung locales: Libyan desert ruins, Cambodian jungles, Parisian cafés, Bali beaches, and Nevada's Burning Man Festival.

Don't let the title fool you. *Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It* is not a self-help manual for the lazy. Rather, in a series of 11 elegantly crafted essays, Dyer traverses the world in search of adventure and enlightenment—and tries to escape the sheer boredom and loneliness of everyday life.

From a psychedelic, rain-soaked walk in Amsterdam to Miami, where he contrasts a South Beach suicide with the city's decaying Art Deco architecture, Dyer mixes ruminations on Nietzsche and Existentialism with a bit of sex, drugs, and rocky travel. "They are a series of separate and distinct journeys," Dyer says from his San Francisco hotel room during a recent signing tour, "though incremental parts of a larger journey." The eternal vagabond was on a brief swing through the States before making his way to French Polynesia via London and Amsterdam.

Unlike traditional travel narratives, *Yoga* is not about an author's reaction to sites and people of a particular destination. Rather, it follows the emotional decline—and resulting breakthrough—of one man set against a backdrop of exotic locales and experiences.

Granted, brief reflections on death and decline may not seem like ideal summer escapism, but Dyer has created a work that exceeds typical armchair travel reading. He expertly blends travel writing, criticism, and memoir with healthy dose of fictionalization.



From a simple turn of phrase to a succinct adjective, the restless British novelist and critic is a pleasure to read. A deft writer, Dyer's wry observations and witty prose seem effortlessly brilliant: "I was an archaeologist only in the linguistic sense: I dug the past."

He is smart and hip without being obnoxious, extraordinarily frank without the crass seediness of a tell-all talk show. As one of his friends puts it, Dyer may just be "Kerouac for Jet Age." —Jeff Ficker

